


CRITICISM OF THE EXAMINATION SYSTEM ANSWERED BY ROOSEVELT



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CRITICISM OF THE EXAMINATION SYSTEM

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PREFATORY *

AMONG the competitors in an examination held in 1895, to furnish an eligible register of assistant statisticians for the Department of Agriculture, was Mr. Judson Grenell of Detroit, managing editor of the *Evening News* of that city, who, as his letters show, took the examination not with a view of obtaining an appointment, but merely to see how the operations of the examination, rating, selection, etc., appeared from the inside. Some time after taking the examination, and after the most successful competitor had received an appointment from Secretary Morton, Mr. Grenell wrote to the United States Civil Service Commission asking to be furnished with a statement of the general averages of all the competitors. The Chief Examiner answered his letter, declining the request on the ground that the Commission simply notifies each competitor of his own standing, but not of the standing of others.

This rule did not meet with Mr. Grenell's approval, and a correspondence took place between him and the Commission. The closing letter of this correspondence from Civil Service Commissioner Theodore Roosevelt furnishes a particularly complete reply to much of the criticism still made by those unacquainted with the facts in regard to Civil Service examinations.

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I.

MR. GRENELL TO THE UNITED STATES CIVIL SERVICE
COMMISSION.

DETROIT, April 12, 1895.

GENTLEMEN :— The declination of one of your subordinates to give me the averages of those who took the Civil Service examination for assistant statistician, Agricultural Department, is not satisfactory. The reason given for not giving it is, in my opinion, not sufficient, either. I have not asked who took the examination; in fact, I have not the remotest idea who they were. I simply ask for the averages of those who took the examination, without the slightest clue as to whom these averages belong. So far as I now know, the rules laid down by the Commission for the compiling of averages were exactly complied with. I only know that a technical knowledge that is of little account in certain contingencies was made more of than any practical knowledge a person may possess. And further, that this technical knowledge can be acquired by any person of average intelligence in six weeks, while knowledge coming from experience, and which is far the most valuable, cannot be acquired without years of observation.

What I want is the averages on each paper of those who took the Civil Service examination for assistant statistician, Agricultural Department. I do not want names. I do not want anything by which I can by any means find out to whom the averages belong. I just want the averages, that is all. I do not believe the Commission will deny me this, if they understand just what I want. I am not finding any fault with the averages given me. I have no desire to take a similar examination. *My object in taking that one has been accomplished.* I just want to know the

averages of others taking the same examination. Can I have these figures? Very truly yours,

JUDSON GRENELL.

II.

MR. JOHN R. PROCTOR, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED
STATES CIVIL SERVICE COMMISSION,
TO MR. GRENELL.

WASHINGTON, April 16, 1895.

SIR:—In reply to your letter of the 12th instant, requesting that you be furnished with the general average of each competitor in the assistant statistician examination for the Department of Agriculture, without the names of the competitors, you are informed that this request cannot be complied with. It is contrary to the practice of the Commission to furnish any competitor with the average of any other person than himself, and the Commission sees no reason for departing from its practice in this case, even to the extent of furnishing the averages without the names of the competitors. On registers which are called "special," and which are for a single bureau of the Government, the Commission declines to inform any applicant of his relative standing. This practice is found to be necessary in order to prevent efforts to use influence in securing appointments. The case is different in regard to those registers from which appointments may be made to any or all Departments of the service. The Commission has no objection to informing applicants of their relative standing on such registers. To comply with your request and furnish the averages of all competitors in the assistant statistician examination would be equivalent to notifying you of your relative standing, which the Commission cannot consent to do. Very respectfully,

JOHN R. PROCTOR, *President.*

III.

MR. GRENELL TO MR. PROCTOR.

DETROIT, April 25, 1895.

DEAR SIR:—Having finally pierced the shell which separates the United States Civil Service Commission from the rest of the world—a fact which is shown by your courteous letter in reply to mine of the 12th inst. in regard to the averages of the competitors for the position of assistant statistician, Agricultural Department—allow me to state again that the reasons advanced why the figures asked for cannot be given are far from satisfactory.

I have a distinct purpose in asking for these particular figures, and while that purpose would have been in a measure attained by asking for other averages, yet I preferred this special examination because I took it myself. As a managing editor I might have said to some subordinate in the office: "Take the Civil Service examination and write your opinions as to its practicability." But had I done so, my opinions would necessarily have been formed from his opinions. As I wanted information at first hand, I took the examination myself.

There is a rising tide of public opinion that the examinations prescribed are more theoretical than practical. There is a growing contempt for the Civil Service Commission. Created to correct abuses, the idea has gained a foothold that it is beginning to confirm and petrify them. Aimed at wrongs, is it not surrounding inefficiency with a network of officialism worse than the original evils? For those who "pass" may be the least capable of filling any position demanding the exercise of common sense and experience.

A glance at the papers prepared for the examination proved the impossibility of my attaining a sufficiently high average to pass. Indeed, I feel assured that the Civil Service Commissioners themselves

could not pass. And I know that two-thirds of the members of the President's Cabinet would "fall down" in the attempt. Not but that the members of the Civil Service Commission and the President's Cabinet are competent to fill the position, but simply because the questions put are in great measure of a class that are of no practical use.

If I remember right, one of the questions asked the definition of an isosceles triangle. In an examination in geometry how appropriate this would have been, but so far as its applying to the collection of statistics, just as sensible a query would be: "What is a Whangdoodle?" or, "How does a Giasticutis walk?" Probably half the questions asked were not practical. They were not unanswerable; they simply had no relation to the subject-matter in hand.

A boy fresh from the high school can take the papers of definitions and mathematical problems and attain anywhere from 80 to 90 to his credit. In fact a fortnight's work would enable most any one of average intelligence to "cram" himself for an examination which he could pass. There are two elderly men who haunt this office daily, so absorbed are they in the "Problem" department. The Civil Service list of mathematical puzzles would be peaches and cream to them. They would fairly wallow in them, and all their answers would be correct. Yet for practical work these old gentlemen are not worth their salt. Still they very likely could have passed the Civil Service examination with more credit (marks) than would be accorded yourself (perhaps) or your correspondent.

Another point: So wrapped up in formalism and "signs" is the Civil Service Commission itself that the very letter I am attempting to answer had to pass through the hands of "W. H. W.," "E. D. P.," "W. L. P.," and finally "L.," before it could be trusted into the hands of the President of the Commission, and for transmission through the mails.

What warrant has anybody for thinking that the

person finally selected for assistant statistician, Agricultural Department, had the highest average, or even passed at all? That is, if no figures are given out. Someone must be told. Who is it? If no one is informed, is the Chief Examiner the sole judge and jury? Has he taken such an examination as to be able to pass on everybody else? Put him in a room with 150 postal clerks and postmen, some of them sitting on his table and talking of "assessments," "entertainments," and the news of the day, and see what show he will make in adding up even a column of figures. That is what I saw when two young men wanting employment in watching a fish-pen were trying to figure out the difference between Fahrenheit and Centigrade as applied to thermometers. That is also my experience. It was actually funny.

What I respectfully ask for and desire are the figures of the competitors who took the Civil Service examination for assistant statistician, Agricultural Department. I do not desire names. I do not want anything that will in any way help me to figure out whom the figures fit. (As a matter of fact I do not know who took the examination.) I do not want to exert any influence to get any particular case reviewed. My own average is too low ever to hope for the most humble place under the Government in any department under Civil Service Rules. But I would like to know if there is any higher authority than the Civil Service Commission itself? That is, are the figures of the examiners open to review by others than the members themselves?

With the highest regard for the intent of the Civil Service Commission, and hoping for a favorable answer, at last, to my simple inquiry that seems to have run against a rule or practice that in my opinion should be suspended or abolished, I am,

Very truly yours,

JUDSON GRENELL.

IV.

CIVIL SERVICE COMMISSIONER THEODORE ROOSEVELT
TO MR. GRENELL.

WASHINGTON, April 29, 1895.

SIR:—I have the honor to answer your letter of April 25, in relation to the Civil Service examination taken by you for assistant statistician in the Department of Agriculture.

The Commission cannot spend its time in answering questions asked from mere curiosity. If it should tell every applicant the averages of all other applicants in an examination it would need to have an additional force of clerks for that purpose; but we are always glad to give to the press any facts which may be of general interest. As I now understand that what you wish is for publication in a newspaper, I take pleasure in giving you the averages of the other candidates.

Twelve persons entered the examination. Of these six obtained an eligible standing, with grades, disregarding fractions, of 90, 86, 86, 80, 80 and 76, respectively. Six failed, with grades of 67, 60, 57, 56, 44 and 42. Among the twelve examined there was only one who stood lower than you, your standing being a fraction less than 44.

Permit me, in the first place, to correct the misapprehension you are under as to the rising tide of public opinion being that the examinations prescribed are more theoretical than practical. I think that if you would look at the returns in the late Chicago city election, or in the New York city election last fall, you would speedily convince yourself that there was no such rising tide. Chicago voted, by fifty thousand majority, for a Civil Service law in many respects more drastic than the federal law, and the people of New York State adopted, by more than one hundred thousand majority, a radical provision in the constitution widely extending the application of the Civil Service law, and establishing its permanency.

You say that there is a growing contempt for the Civil Service Law. My experience is directly the opposite, and I am positive that the contempt of which you speak exists only in the minds of the very ignorant, and that these very ignorant are less numerous, so far as this subject is concerned, than they were only a few years ago, and grow less numerous year by year.

So far from "surrounding inefficiency with a network of officialism," the law has immensely benefited every office to which it has been applied. The slightest inquiry will satisfy you of the truth of this statement. The Railway Mail Service is at a higher point of efficiency than ever before, and it is precisely the branch of the Government in which the law has been most rigidly applied. When that service came under the Civil Service Law, in 1889, the record of correct routings was 2,834 to one; for the year 1894 it is 7,831 to one. This record is unprecedented in the history of the service. As a matter of practical experience, every Cabinet officer whom I have seen in Washington has, before the end of his term, come to the conclusion that if there was any bureau in which he needed special efficiency he had to put it under the Civil Service Law. Mr. Carroll D. Wright recently stated to me that the failure to classify the Census Office under the law had cost the government just about two million dollars. The postoffices where the law is most faithfully observed are precisely the offices where the best service is rendered to the public and where the employees are most able, courteous and efficient. The men who pass the examinations are, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, those most capable of filling the positions "demanding the exercise of common sense and experience."

You say that "a glance at the papers prepared for the examination proved the impossibility of my (your) attaining a sufficiently high average to pass. Indeed, I (you) feel sure the Civil Service Commissioners themselves could not pass, and I (you) know that two-thirds of the present members of the President's

Cabinet would 'fall down' in the attempt." Evidently you do not understand the purpose of holding special examinations for special places. When we hold an examination for assistant statistician our aim is to get a man who is an assistant statistician, not one who is a Civil Service Commissioner or a Cabinet Officer. It would be a proof of the incompetency of the Commission if it framed an examination for assistant statistician with a view of having Cabinet Officers and Civil Service Commissioners pass it. The Commission holds examinations for all kinds of positions. For instance, we hold them for the position of assistant astronomer. Do you mean seriously to imply that when we hold an examination for astronomer we should make that examination one which the average Cabinet Officer could pass? It would be a mere chance if any member of any Cabinet was fit to be an astronomer, or, for that matter, an assistant statistician. I do not suppose that any member of the present Cabinet, or of the Cabinet of Mr. Harrison, would be fit for either of these positions. I know that no member of either Cabinet would be as fit for a statistician as the man who was appointed under the assistant statistician examination. In your own case, as you bring the matter up, your examination showed that you were entirely unfit to hold the office you sought. Doubtless you are an admirable newspaper editor, and you may be fit for much higher work than that of an assistant statistician, but you are not fit for that particular work, and the Commission would have been to blame if it had framed an examination which would not have emphasized the difference between the man who was competent to be an assistant statistician and one who was not competent, no matter how good this latter individual might be in some other line of work.

You say the questions are not practical, and instance one of the questions in reference to a geometrical problem as having no relation to the subject-matter in hand. This shows that you do not understand what the work of an assistant statistician really is. As a

matter of fact, many statistics are illustrated by geometrical figures and problems. This is the case with the work now actually performed by the assistant statistician in the Department of Agriculture. So you see that the question was all right. It was your lack of understanding of the subject which was to blame.

You say that a boy fresh from a high school could get 80 to 90 to his credit, and that any one could cram him up so as to pass after a fortnight's work. Again you are completely in error. The average age of those passing our examinations is 27 years. Instead of being fresh from the high schools, the men have been out of them at least ten years on the average. The man who stood at the head of the list in the examination you took, and who received the appointment, was 43 years old and was already a computer in the United States Coast Survey. Remember that you are only theorizing on the subject, while I am speaking from a thorough acquaintance with the facts of the case. As a matter of fact the persons who get office under us stand higher in every way than those appointed under the old methods, and form an exceptionally intelligent, honest and able class of employees. In our own bureau we have more than fifty men employed. They all came in under our own examinations, standing at the head of the lists, and it would be impossible to get, in public or private employment, a better corps of men than they are.

None of the men who were coached for this [assistant statistician] examination passed. I have given you the particulars about the man who stood highest. The man who stood second was 38 years old, and had been a statistician in the Census Bureau. The man who stood third was 26 years old, a post-graduate student of Cornell University, and afterwards private secretary to a member of Congress. The man who stood fourth was 24 years old, and was a Fellow in Political Economy and Sociology of the Chicago University. The man who stood fifth was 29, and was an accountant in New York. He had formerly been an instructor in statistics in the University of Chicago.

You complain that the Commission is "wrapped up in formalism and signs" because the letter you received had the initials of various persons put upon it. Your saying this arises evidently from the fact that you have never had any experience in conducting the business of a large office. The Civil Service Commission receives and answers more than one hundred thousand letters a year, and the slightest consideration will show you that we must have a regular system in dealing with so extensive a correspondence.

You ask, what warrant has anybody for thinking that the person selected had the highest average or even passed at all. You have the excellent warrant that as soon as the man is appointed the fact is made public, and any responsible person may learn all the facts and see the markings if he can show the Commission that there is the slightest ground for imputing favoritism one way or the other. The name of every person appointed in the departmental service is printed in the Commission's annual reports, and the name of the person who was appointed assistant statistician is Henry Farquhar. If any one has the slightest reason for thinking that he was favored in any way, the Commission will show his papers; but as a matter of fact such a supposition is, of course, absurd. The papers were marked by a board of experts at the same time that they marked the papers of the other applicants, and the examiners did not know the names of any of the persons whose papers they were marking. It may interest you to know that the Secretary of Agriculture chose the highest man on the list, and informs us that he is the most satisfactory man in statistical work that he ever had, and that after the appointment had been made he received a letter from Mr. Edward Atkinson vouching for the remarkable capacity of the man in the very lines upon which we tested him, and for the very business in which he was to be employed. The Secretary of Agriculture said he thought he was the best man in the United States for the position. You thus see that in this very examination of which you complain, the

man who passed the highest was the best man that could have been found anywhere for the position. The examination was eminently practical in character, and no man who failed to pass it could be considered competent for the position.

There is no "shell separating the Commission from the outer world." With one hundred thousand correspondents a year it is a simple impossibility to gratify the curiosity of each, unless we can be assured that some public interest is to be subserved. All that we do is perfectly open. The registers for the ordinary positions are made public as soon as the papers are marked. In the case of special examinations, where there would be a chance of exercising political pressure or personal favoritism, the registers are not made public until after the appointments have been made. Then the names and the averages will be given to any newspapers desiring to publish them.

The past year has witnessed greater progress toward the full accomplishment of the Reform idea in national, state and municipal government, taken as a whole, than any other year since the original law was passed.

Very respectfully,

THEODORE ROOSEVELT.